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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DUSHANBE 000779

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TI

SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S SHARIPOV DISCUSSES CORRUPTION, IRAN, RUSSIA,
HYDRO-POWER POLITICS

REF: A) DUSHANBE 0768 B) DUSHANBE 0752 C) DUSHANBE 0616 D) DUSHANBE 0583

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, EXEC, Embassy
Dushanbe.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) The Ambassador met April 26 with Director of the President's Strategic Research Center (SRC) Suhrob Sharipov for a wide-ranging discussion on the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), anti-corruption efforts in Tajikistan, Iranian-Tajik relations, and Tajikistan's increasing unease with Russia's Central Asia policies. Sharipov also provided unusually frank insight into the recent firing of Minister of Energy Nurmahmadov (reftel A). Sharipov appears to be an increasingly influential voice for progressive policy and reform in the President's inner circle.

MCC THRESHOLD STATUS LINKED TO ANTI-CORRUPTION, GOOD GOVERNANCE

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador requested to meet with Sharipov to present him with background documents in Russian about the Millennium Challenge Corporation, since Sharipov is leading a new effort to define the extent of corruption in Tajikistan and to develop strategies to try to bring it under control (reftel C). Sharipov's SRC, with UNDP support, is engaged in a series of nation-wide public-opinion focus groups and research studies to identify sources of corruption, define its extent, and propose pragmatic solutions

¶3. (C) The Ambassador told Sharipov there is no reason, in principle, Tajikistan could not begin to negotiate to be

considered for MCC threshold status during the next year, especially if the Tajik Government begins to show serious and sustained efforts to rein in corruption. Taking careful notes, Sharipov responded that he credits President Rahmonov himself with anti-corruption initiatives to counter "government ministries that act as family businesses." (COMMENT: We know, in fact, that this key portion of the President's annual speech to Parliament on April 20 (reftel B) originated with Sharipov. Thus, he was being dutifully deferential to his boss. That does not, however, in any way mitigate the importance of what Rahmonov said in public to the nation about corruption. END COMMENT.)

¶4. (C) Sharipov readily agreed MCC would be an important step forward for Tajikistan, which is "legitimately trying to create a democratic reality." He acknowledged the recent nearly \$300 million MCC contract with Armenia had generated keen interest at the top levels of the Tajik government. Sharipov repeated his deep concern that corruption was the leading cause of the erosion of public support for the government, a lesson learned from the last two years of CIS "color revolutions." The Ambassador told Sharipov governments that rule justly, support economic freedom, and invest in their own people can become MCC candidates. Sharipov said he clearly understood and that his SRC was working towards that goal.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador and Sharipov brainstormed several anti-corruption strategies, both agreeing that the culture of institutionalized and deeply rooted CIS corruption will not be solved overnight. Sharipov said his main goal was to paint a full picture of the problem for President Rahmonov, and that major institutional changes could be expected to come as a result. He noted that he had just concluded the second phase of his nation-wide focus-group study that had included about 2,500

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participants from all levels of society. The Ambassador suggested that an independent blue-ribbon commission of highly respected citizens and specially vetted law-enforcement units might help to give the process credibility, especially since Sharipov volunteered that the very worst corruption is among the law-enforcement agencies, specifically, he said, the Ministry of Interior and Prosecutor General's office. Sharipov fully agreed with this suggestion, taking a note, and added that the establishment of an independent ombudsman would also be an option, so that the people would have a legitimate institution to take their complaints to.

¶6. (C) Sharipov admitted that many current ministers and government officials were "patriots in word only, quickly becoming corrupt after assuming power themselves." The Ambassador noted that true anti-corruption moves need to take place through a transparent, non-political, objective, and absolutely fair process. Anti-corruption moves cannot be used to sideline political opponents. Sharipov said he himself fully agreed. He informed the Ambassador that his SRC would soon open seven branch offices throughout Tajikistan to get close to the people and sources of information on public opinion and corruption. He added that corruption and poverty go hand in hand, and that Tajikistan would need a complete overhaul to address all levels of the corruption issue. He said, "Tajikistan must meet international standards or it will fail."

IRAN

¶7. (C) Sharipov then on his own accord turned to foreign affairs. About Iranian-Tajik relations, he said Tajikistan, as a Persian-language and -culture country, understands Iran more than other countries and, no matter how small, could play a role to assist Iran and the West understand one another. He asserted Iran is behaving recklessly by insisting publicly on moves that clearly agitate Western nations. He noted that he did not want Tajikistan to lose the goodwill and cooperation of the international community, gained over many years of cooperation on counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, and security matters, by supporting Iran. He said the top levels of the Government of

Tajikistan fully understand "international opinion," and he repeated Tajikistan's desire to play a positive role in Iranian affairs.

¶18. (C) COMMENT: Tajikistan has never been swayed by Iran's political ideology or religious extremism. But Tajikistan, nevertheless, carefully welcomes, and needs, Iranian financial investment in infrastructure projects, like the Anzob Tunnel and Sangtuda-II hydroelectric station. As Foreign Minister Nazarov once told the Ambassador, "All money smells the same." END COMMENT.

RUSSIA

¶19. (C) Continuing his analysis of the direction of Tajikistan's foreign policy, Sharipov bluntly stated, "our political elite are genuinely Russia-leaning." He described this as a "mistake," and said that he often reminds his government colleagues to maintain a more objective stance with the other major countries. Sharipov said he is criticized for this attitude, but he feels that Tajikistan needs to move beyond a "brotherly relationship" with Russia, and, in fact, a "younger brotherly relationship." (COMMENT: During the past 18 months, this is the core message the Ambassador has given President Rahmonov, especially when it has appeared that the Government of Tajikistan was letting the "balance of relationships" become

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unhealthily unbalanced toward Russia. END COMMENT.) Sharipov outlined the benefits Tajikistan would derive from more open competition for investment between Russian and international corporations.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador told Sharipov he is frankly dismayed with recent trends in Russian foreign policy in the CIS. The United States has never denied that Russia has historic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and economic special interests in Central Asia. For the past five years the United States has worked hard to seek to build a constructive partnership with Russia that would be to the benefit of the Central Asia states. But it appears Russia has not only rejected these positive overtures, but now even wants to try to push the United States out of the region. Sharipov, taking close notes, nodded his agreement as the Ambassador explained that U.S. policy in the region is frankly open and transparent without hidden agendas, focusing on supporting the independence, sovereignty, and stability of the Central Asian states, and, more recently, finding ways to promote the development of energy resources and infrastructure integration in the region.

¶11. (C) Sharipov averred he, others, and President Rahmonov himself are increasingly appalled by the alarming xenophobic and even fascist tendencies in Russian life and politics. (COMMENT: We do not believe this was said for our benefit. We have increasingly heard it from others in the Tajik government, including the avuncular Foreign Minister Nazarov. It is also an increasingly frequent topic of Tajik press op-eds. END COMMENT.)

FORMER ENERGY MINISTER - PROBABLY A CROOK, MAYBE A SELL-OUT

¶12. (C) When asked if the recent dismissal of Minister of Energy Jurabek Nurmahmadov (reftel A) portends any policy shifts, Sharipov replied that any high-profile shift like this one is driven by policy. He specifically cited recent Tajik negotiations with RusAl Chairman Oleg Deripaska over the Rogun hydropower project, and alleged Nurmahmadov had done little to advocate Tajikistan's national interests. Sharipov hinted strongly Nurmahmadov had had personal interests foremost in mind and had not made a strong enough case for Tajikistan's view of how the project should be developed. Sharipov added that ever since Deripaska had gone to Uzbekistan to court Karimov and First Daughter Gulnora, and had announced publicly he would not do anything at TadaZ that would harm Uzbekistan's environment, President Rahmonov had been incensed, suspecting Deripaska had reached a secret understanding with Uzbekistan to limit

Tajikistan's ability to truly benefit economically from its own hydropower potential. Sharipov hinted broadly that former Minister of Energy Nurmahmadov had prospered privately from RusAl "inducements." Sharipov claimed he personally had insisted to President Rahmonov that a third country, maybe Pakistan or China, had to be brought into the Rogun negotiations for the sake of Tajikistan's own national interests. Surprisingly, Sharipov took personal credit for Nurmahmadov's dismissal, claiming he had argued sovereignty and national interests to Rahmonov.

¶13. (C) (COMMENT: Although it's possible Sharipov might have been hyping his own role in this drama, he does not really strike us as an exaggerator. Others with insider information have told us Nurmahmadov is a "Tajik oligarch" who cares first and foremost about lining his own pockets, and has significant business and real estate interests in Dubai and, more recently, staggeringly expensive residential real estate in Moscow. END

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COMMENT.)

¶14. (C) Sharipov lamented Russia's recent self-serving "imperial" moves in Central Asia, contrasting Russia's actions with other more benign former empires like Britain and France. The Ambassador concurred it is difficult for a country to learn how to become "a former colonial power." Sharipov heatedly pointed to Tajik labor migrants in Russia, their lack of protection under Russian law, and how Russia constantly abuses "the blacks." Sharipov concluded that Russia seems to be spurning Tajikistan as a partner and is acting in its own arrogant and rapacious interests in most areas. He added, "For only a nominal cost in protection and cooperation, Russia could solve most bilateral problems and calm most Tajik fears - but it won't do so."

¶15. (C) COMMENT. In this long, unusually informal and frank meeting, Sharipov consistently used the words "pragmatic" and "objective" throughout this conversation, especially when talking about the direction Tajikistan wants to take - not in the Soviet-style usage, but in a way that seemed reasonably modern and international. He praised the United States for its restrained, sensible, and "objective" analysis of Tajikistan. He told the Ambassador he had closely followed his public speeches and activities in Tajikistan, and was especially pleased to begin to build this new personal relationship with him that he hoped would be increasingly productive. He hinted strongly that President Rahmonov had personally encouraged him to build a more in-depth relationship with the Ambassador and others at the U.S. Embassy. Later in the day, the SRC telephoned the Embassy and asked permission to publish the Ambassador's recent speech on economics, investment, and corruption (reftel D) as an official Tajik Government document.

¶16. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. We have no illusions that we are experiencing a sudden positive turn for the better. We fully understand that a small and weak state like Tajikistan must work hard to balance its power relationships, and has a natural tendency to play one power against another. That said, we have noticed increasing hints and circumstantial evidence in recent months that Tajikistan is rethinking its large-power relationships. We know there will likely be any number of heart-stopping plunges on this roller coaster. We know the Russia-dominated Tajik Ministry of Security is a formidable challenge, to say the least. But we suggest we should take every advantage we can in this endlessly fascinating game. We are especially grateful that Assistant Secretary of State Boucher will soon be in Dushanbe, and also that USCENTCOM and the Marshall Center are co-sponsoring the first-ever regional counter-narcotics conference in Dushanbe in mid-May. Both are opportunities to move forward U.S. foreign policy in the region. We further suggest that Assistant Secretary Boucher may want to consider making MCC one of his several key talking points with President Rahmonov on May 8. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND